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Research

"This Is What I Should Have Been Feeling": Transformations and Transitions in an LGBTQIA+ Inclusive Rugby Club

David Eldridge [1]

[1] School of Arts and Humanities, University of Hull

Keywords

LGBTQIA+; homophobia; inclusive sports; International Gay Rugby (IGR); physical education; Multiple and Multidimensional Transitions; Inclusive Masculinity Theory.

Abstract

Across the UK, LGBTQIA+ sports clubs have become an established feature of the grassroots sporting landscape, with networks such as International Gay Rugby (IGR) expanding rapidly over the past two decades. Their continued growth suggests that many LGBTQIA+ people still perceive mainstream sport as exclusionary or unwelcoming. Yet scholarship remains limited, and studies grounded in Inclusive Masculinity Theory (IMT) frequently posit that declining homophobia has rendered such clubs primarily social spaces rather than sites of necessary protection or transformation.

This article applies Multiple and Multidimensional Transitions (MMT) theory to the experiences of 14 gay and bisexual rugby players, to examine the ongoing relevance and value of LGBTQIA+ inclusive sports spaces. It shows how joining an inclusive rugby team prompts a dynamic set of interconnected transitions across psychological, cultural, identity and social domains. By highlighting these ongoing multidimensional processes, MMT demonstrates that LGBTQIA+ sports teams remain vital not merely as alternatives to homophobic environments, but as spaces that actively construct queer belonging and enable more expansive, authentic ways of being in sport.

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Introduction

> No one at the Roundheads gave a shit about your size, or your sexuality, or your gender, or whatever it was… I feel like this is what I should have been feeling when I was at school.
>
> Player I, gay male, b. 1997, member of the Hull Roundheads Rugby Club.

The Hull Roundheads Rugby Club, founded in 2018 in northeast England, defines itself as a "gay and inclusive" team. It is part of the International Gay Rugby (IGR) network, comprising over 130 clubs and 10,000 players worldwide (https://igrugby.com). Since its inception with just six clubs in 2000, IGR has become one of the most successful grassroots inclusion movements in sport, with its phenomenal growth reflecting a sustained desire among LGBTQIA+ people for 'safe spaces' in sport. Yet scholarship on it remains limited, focusing largely on why people join, rather than the transformative experiences that follow. Most of this work has drawn on Eric Anderson's Inclusive Masculinity Theory (IMT), which argues that younger heterosexual men, particularly in the UK and USA, are now so readily accepting that gay and bisexual men no longer need separate teams as refuge from homophobia (Anderson, 2009; Muir et al., 2022). IMT scholars therefore tend to suggest players now join LGBTQIA+-inclusive clubs primarily for social capital and friendship, rather than protection from discrimination.

By applying Multiple and Multidimensional Transitions (MMT) theory to testimonies of 14 Hull Roundheads players, this study reframes LGBTQIA+ participation in such clubs not as a single issue of masculinity or social acceptance, but as a network of interlinked psychological, social, cultural and identity transitions (Jindal-Snape, 2016a). This approach captures the ongoing impact of trauma, self-exclusion, and personal reinvention that IMT tends to overlook, and underscores that mainstream "inclusion" has far from eradicated the need for distinct queer sporting spaces.

LGBTQIA+ Participation in Sports in the UK

The visibility of 'out' gay, lesbian and bisexual athletes at elite levels of sport is often cited as evidence of "progress towards inclusivity and acceptance," exemplified by the 199 openly LGB athletes participating at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games, including 12 from Team GB (Buzinski, 2024). However, at the grassroots level, many LGBTQIA+ individuals still feel alienation and exclusion: 42% in the UK report avoiding sports due to discriminatory experiences, and nearly half describe sports culture as unwelcoming or intimidating (Englefield, L., et al., 2017). Gay men participate in team sports at half the rate of their heterosexual peers (32.8% versus 67.6%) (Denison et al., 2021; Doull et al., 2018). Research shows this disengagement commonly stems from school experiences. Landi (2019) found that 59 out of 60 LGBTQIA+ high school students they interviewed dropped physical education as soon as they were able; while Lynch et al. (2023) linked 'traumatic' experiences of sports at school to lasting mental health challenges. For many LGBTQIA+ adults, therefore, joining a sports team involves overcoming significant psychological barriers and new social transitions.

The continued growth of LGBTQIA+ specific inclusive sports clubs demonstrates the need. In the UK, umbrella organizations like BLAGGS in Brighton, OutForSport in London and LEAP Sports Scotland collectively support hundreds of inclusive teams, while the IGR network includes almost 40 UK-based clubs. Within its first year, over 45 people joined the Hull Roundheads - most taking up a team sport for the first time. As LEAP Sports Scotland states, the primary aim of such organizations is to

overcome “the structural, social and personal barriers” that deter LGBTQIA+ individuals from taking part in sports and physical activity (https://leapsports.org/about).

Aim of the Study

Using the lens of MMT to examine the experiences of individuals who join such clubs and re-engage with sports after a period of alienation, allows us to reframe these teams as ‘transitional gateways’ and explore the transformations that occur within them. This study seeks to determine how MMT can move us beyond analyses grounded in Inclusive Masculinity Theory, to reveal the complex, interconnected changes that occur when LGBTQIA+ individuals enter and participate in these spaces, and show how these processes reshape both individual self-understanding and the collective culture of the club.

Literature Review

Scholarship on LGBTQIA+-oriented sports clubs remains limited. Symons’ *The Gay Games* (2012) offers insights into the wider movement, while Krane ed. (2018), *Sex, Gender and Sexuality in Sport* and Lawrence et al., eds. (2024), *Routledge Handbook of Sport, Leisure and Social Justice,* include some consideration of queer sports teams within their collected essays. Articles like Jones and McCarthy (2010) ‘Mapping the Landscape of Gay Men’s Football’, and Cauldwell (2007), ‘Queering the Field’, have focused on football. But only six published articles have focused specifically on IGR clubs, consistently emphasising perceived tensions between masculinity and homosexuality in rugby culture. Price and Parker’s (2003) study of London’s Kings Cross Steelers argued that the club emerged in 1995 in reaction to rugby’s “macho culture,” wherein homophobia and AIDS-phobia were prevalent. Madden (2013) similarly analysed Dublin’s Emerald Warriors, showing how the club simultaneously affirmed and subverted the rough, aggressive hypermasculinity associated with the sport, with promotional images of “emphatically muscular” players wearing high heels rather than rugby boots, ‘queering’ rugby’s traditional image.

Inclusive Masculinity Theory (IMT) has reinforced this focus on masculinity. Anderson’s body of research (solidified in *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities* (2009)) documented reduced levels of homophobia and misogyny among younger heterosexual men in the US and UK; and argued that a decline in their “homohysteria” (straight men’s fear of being *perceived* to be gay) enabled them to embrace and embody more diverse and ‘inclusive’ masculine identities. Anderson and McGuire (2010), for example, showed how straight British university rugby players rejected homophobic language and adopted behaviours once considered ‘unmasculine’ such as openly expressing and displaying their feelings for their teammates. Many male athletes, therefore, no longer needed to disparage homosexuality, or display aggression, physical dominance and stoicism to assert their heterosexuality. Jarvis (2015) observed heterosexual men joining IGR clubs as evidence of declining stigma and homohysteria.

IMT-informed research has thus posited that sporting cultures, at least in the West, are increasingly “post-homophobic” -and some studies of IGR clubs have extended that argument. Gaston and Dixon (2020) found that gay men joined the Liverpool Tritons club for social reasons, while Muir et al. (2022) drew on interviews with players from several IGR clubs in the south of England, to argue that IGR clubs were no longer viewed as “escapes [from] homophobia of the broader rugby culture.” Continued growth was consequently attributed to social, rather than protective value.

Critics, however, contend that this optimistic reading is uneven and premature. Denison et al. (2021), Storr et al. (2022), Townshend and MacLean (2023), and Pringle (2024) show that homonegativity persists, particularly at the grassroots level. Exclusionary language remains common. Pringle and Denison (2024) found young heterosexual rugby players consistently used phrases such as "that's so gay," even as the players themselves disavowed homophobia. Townshend and MacLean (2023) documented many gay rugby players still concealing their sexuality or withdrawing from mainstream sports because of such 'banter' or other homonegative behaviours. Recent studies have also demonstrated that mainstream sports organizations claiming to be "inclusive" often resist further change, even though barriers to LGBTQIA+ participation are still very evident within them.

This study advances the debate by applying Multiple and Multidimensional Transitions theory (Jindal-Snape 2016a). MMT examines how individuals experience interconnected transitions across multiple domains – including the psychological, social, cultural and physical – in multiple contexts. Each transition can trigger others, across different domains, shaping not only the individual's experience, but those around them too, in multidimensional ways. Although applied in education, healthcare and family contexts, and occasionally in LGBTQIA+ studies (Glazzard et al., 2020; Gordon et al., 2017; Jindal-Snape et al., 2019), this is its first application in LGBTQIA+ sport.

The value of this approach is not to deny that homophobia in sport may have declined or that IGR clubs provide vital social networks. Rather, an MMT analysis reveals a deeper layer of meaning by highlighting the transformative processes that LGBTQIA+ individuals experience as they (re)enter sport and the transitions that the clubs themselves undergo as they develop in response to their members' journeys. By centring these ongoing, relational processes, it reconceptualizes inclusion as a continual negotiation shaped by these multidimensional transitions. Accordingly, this study asks how such transitions construct inclusion and help explain the continued growth of LGBTQIA+ sports clubs.

Project Design and Methodology

Positionality Statement

My engagement with this research arises from both professional and personal experience. As a co-founder of the Hull Roundheads Rugby Club, I have observed first-hand the psychological, cultural and social transitions that inclusive sports participation can foster. My initial motivation for establishing the Roundheads stemmed from seeing the positive impact that joining an IGR team had on a friend's wellbeing, alongside recognizing the lack of comparable opportunities for LGBTQIA+ individuals in Hull. Entering rugby at the age of 45, with little prior sporting background, I shared many of the same apprehensions about belonging and possible exclusion later described by participants.

The interviews informing this study were conducted in late 2021 as part of an Ideas Fund project (supported by the Wellcome Trust and British Science Association) which enabled the Roundheads to commission an independent researcher to document members' experiences of joining the team - exploring their personal journeys, barriers to participation in sports, and experiences since becoming

involved. The purpose of the interviews was to provide the basis for *Safer,* a play written by Dr Sarah Jane Dickenson, which premiered at Pride in Hull in July 2022 (Dickenson, 2022). The ongoing *Safer* project blends research, theatre and community engagement, sharing the team's voices locally and nationally to support discussion about creating more inclusive sporting environments (see https://www.hull.ac.uk/research/projects/safer; and Eldridge, et al., 2024).

Participants gave informed consent for their anonymised interviews to be used in further research, including this study. I had no role in the original data collection to minimise bias; interviews were conducted by independent researcher Matthew Sedman, an out gay man already known to the team through previous work with them on a Pride project for Hull Museums and Galleries. This familiarity fostered mutual trust and openness, aligning with Summerskill et al. (2022) and Robinson (2022), who show that LGBTQIA+ insider-interviewers often elicit richer and more nuanced accounts of minority experience.

My role in this study has centred on theoretical framing, data analysis and contextual interpretation of the interview transcripts. My own insider perspective has aided interpretation while requiring ongoing reflexivity regarding my position within the community being studied.

Participants and Interview Procedure

Twenty-five members of the Hull Roundheads took part in one-to-one semi-structured interviews in December 2021 and January 2022. All were self-selecting volunteers reflecting *Safer*'s aim to capture a wide range of experiences within the club. Interviews followed a conversational format, encouraging participants to reflect on their engagement with sport, and the intersections of their sexuality, gender, identity, confidence and belonging.

Sedman digitally recorded and transcribed the interviews verbatim. Transcripts were then shared with participants for review and amendment before approval. He then anonymized the data by assigning pseudonymous letters to each participant and redacting identifying details, before making the transcripts available to Dickenson and myself.

For this article, the focus is placed exclusively on the experiences of participants minoritised by sexuality. While heterosexual teammates offer valuable perspectives on allyship and inclusive team culture, their narratives warrant a separate and distinct analysis beyond the scope of the present study. The analytical dataset therefore comprises 14 participants: 11 gay cisgender men, one bisexual cisgender man, and two transgender men (one identifying as gay, one as bisexual). Comments relating specifically to the gendered transition of the transgender players are not explored here. All participants identified as white British.

Pseudonym	Sexuality	Gender Identity	Joined Team	Age on Joining
Player A	Gay	Cis male	Jan 2019	28
Player C	Gay	Cis male	Sept 2018	33
Player D	Gay	Cis male	Jan 2019	20
Player E	Bisexual	Cis male	Oct 2018	46
Player F	Gay	Trans male	Sept 2018	26
Player G	Gay	Cis male	Sept 2018	37
Player H	Gay	Cis male	June 2021	37
Player I	Gay	Cis male	Oct 2020	23
Player J	Gay	Cis male	Sept 2018	30
Player L	Gay	Cis male	Nov 2018	26
Player M	Gay	Cis male	May 2019	28
Player O	Bisexual	Trans male	Sept 2018	37
Player Q	Gay	Cis male	Sept 2018	27
Player U	Gay	Cis male	Dec 2019	33
Player Y	Gay	Cis male	June 2021	30

Table 1 Participant Characteristics

Data Analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis approach was undertaken, following Braun and Clarke (2006). After multiple readings of the 13 transcripts, key transitional experiences were identified which aligned with the distinct types of transitions categorised in Jindal-Snape's (2016a) Multiple and Multidimensional Transitions (MMT) framework. These were mapped on to each individual narrative, and then comparative analysis enabled the identification of shared patterns, allowing the themes to be organized according to the psychological, cultural, identity, and social transitions evident across participants.

The findings are presented in two parts. First, the four primary transition types are discussed as they emerged across the dataset as a whole. Second, an in-depth case study of Player A illustrates how these transitions can interact holistically within a single participant's experience.

Ethics Approval

Informed consent was sought using a participant information sheet and consent form. Participants were assured of their rights to confidentiality and anonymity, with the interviewer anonymising the transcripts before providing them to the author. Ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts, Culture and Education at the University of Hull.

Findings and Analysis

The interviews with the 14 participants revealed several types of transition, with four that could be identified as being especially prominent (as shown in Figure 1).

i) **Psychological:** discussing long-term fears, overcoming low self-esteem, and processing past trauma rooted in experience of homonegativity and/or bullying.

ii) **Cultural:** navigating the creation of a new/different sporting culture within the club; shaping inclusive behaviours and ethos.

iii) **Identity**: rethinking and embracing alternative forms of masculinity; and integrating sexual or gender identity with new athletic identities.

iv) **Social**: building friendships and communities

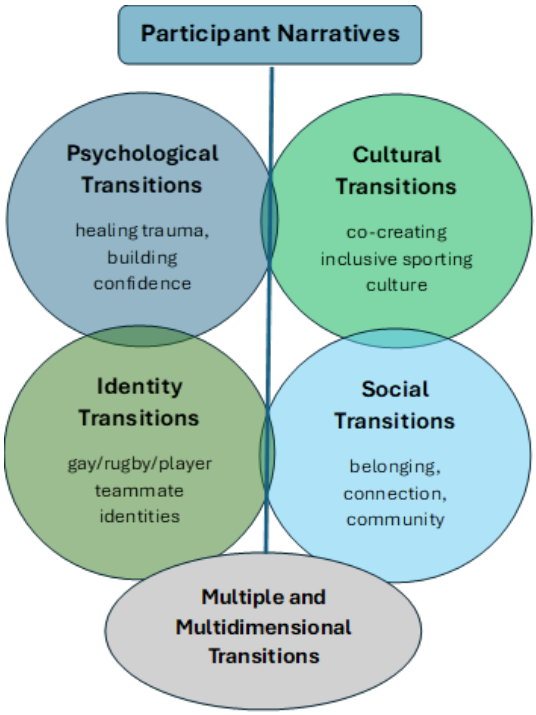

Figure 1: Illustration of Multiple and Multidimensional Transitions evident in the narratives of Hull Roundheads Rugby Club members.

Psychological Transitions: Overcoming Trauma

The testimonies of Roundheads members strongly support Lynch's (2023) assertion that "trauma" remains an apt description of many gay men's experiences of school sport. Player C explicitly used the word "traumatized" to characterize his PE memories. Player Y recalled his experience as "terrifying":

> Doing PE at school and being the gay one and always getting smacked with the hockey sticks, or not getting picked for teams, or just the horror of being in the changing room is mostly what my experience of sport is… I got beat up in the locker room a few times.

For some the trauma came not only from peers. As Player L explained:

> I came out quite early at school…. One day, in year 8 or 9, we was doing rugby, ironically... and the PE teacher called me over… and said, "Right, you're now going to do star jumps, but you need to say, I'm a pink fluffy star every time you do a star jump" … It turned into humiliation in front of everyone.

Although severity of these experiences varied depending on whether participants were "out", internalised fears still shaped the sporting identities of those who had remained closeted. Player H, who was "questioning" his sexuality at the time, stayed silent when witnessing peers "always getting picked on because they were quite effeminate." He felt "bad that I never stood up for them," but recognised that he did not act because he feared becoming a target himself; and that made sports spaces feel "horrendous." This aligns with Townshend's concept of a "cycle of LGBT exclusion," where witnessing routine acceptance of homonegative behaviours leads individuals to withdraw or mask their identity. Players M and Q confirmed this dynamic, both performing minimal participation to avoid suspicion:

> There was always this bizarre connection - if you weren't good at team sports, you didn't want to get involved, then you were gay, you know… [So], I'd get in the kit and go out onto the pitch… and I would just go and stand off to the side. If the ball came near, I would make a vague attempt to trot over to it. That would only usually earn me a reprimand from one of my other classmates who would go "Why didn't you get the fucking ball?" … It never went much further than that.

Player Q likewise recalled:

> I didn't want to chance it. So, I'd be playing football and if someone was dribbling the ball at me, I'd just like stick a leg out and like, appear that I was like trying. But I always felt like, "Well, if I just drift into the background, I can't be a target for any kind of hyper-masculinity."

Such strategies reduced open harassment but also required constant self- monitoring in anticipation of how peers might perceive them, compounding the anxiety they associated with sports.

These histories created pronounced psychological barriers when participants re-entered sports as adults. On joining the Roundheads, Player J described his "absolute fear" entering a changing room for the first time in 15 years:

> I thought, "I'm being ridiculous. I'm 30-odd years old and I'm still worried about what people in a sports team or in a locker room are going to think about me?" … It stays with you, stuff like that.

Five participants (A, I, L, M, U) described sitting in their cars before their first training sessions, almost paralysed with anxiety and debating whether to leave:

> Turn around, just go home. This isn't for you. (Player A)

Stepping out of the car became a tangible transition point – a moment of confronting years of internalized trauma. And crossing that threshold set in motion a new psychological identity. As Player M reflected:

> Straight away it felt like "Wow – this is a very different locker room experience to thinking back to school" … Everyone was enthused and friendly and happy … It was a nice kind of moment of thinking, 'I was scared, I was worried. But I did it, and actually it paid off.'

Contrary to claims that "gay rugby teams no longer exist for the purpose [of] being a safe haven from homophobia" (Muir et al., 2022), these testimonies show that the psychological challenges of joining sport remain profound for many LGBTQIA+ adults. MMT highlights that overcoming these barriers is itself a key transition, shaping the powerful positivity participants then associated with the club's culture.

Cultural Transitions: Creating a Safer Space

As Player M's testimony suggests, overcoming psychological fear was inseparable from entering a distinctly different cultural environment. The Roundheads proactively sought to build a supportive non-judgemental sporting culture, in contrast to the exclusionary and homonegative environments many members associated with school sport. A small symbolic gesture of welcome at Player M's first training session made a big impression, when another player handed him a pair of rainbow laces and said:

> When you come back next time – because you will – I'm sure you will – you could put them on your boots.

For Player M:

> That moment seemed like a very sharp break between school and times of old.

Such a cultural shift was intentionally sought by the founding members, drawing on guidance from other IGR teams, including the regional representative in Manchester and members of the Leeds Hunters. But primarily it was shaped by players sharing experiences and adapting to each other's transitions. As Player M expressed, they were:

> Starting from the grassroots, so low that we're in the soil.

Unlike most mainstream rugby clubs, where players typically join in childhood, IGR teams like the Roundheads cater to adults who often arrive with no prior rugby experience and painful histories of sporting exclusion. Consequently, coaches quickly adopted “back-to-basics" methods, prioritising inclusion over performance. The culture at training was therefore quite different in its expectations, as Player Q observed:

> I knew it would be different because it was aimed at LGBT people, but I didn't know it was going to be as relaxed as it was... With some more conventional teams, it's like you have to show your skills from day one or you're not going to make the First Team, stuff like that. It wasn't about that with the Roundheads. It wasn't about your fitness. It wasn't about your experience level. It was just about having fun at that stage.

A crucial aspect was a shared commitment to avoid replicating language and behaviour that had previously caused harm. Mistakes were therefore met with reassurance, not ridicule:

> Somebody may fumble the ball, but nobody called them out with hostile intent... If anyone’s made any mistakes that’s been blatantly obvious, nobody ever takes the piss or brings it up in front of everyone. (Player U)

> Even when people put themselves down [for mistakes], they’ve been told to move on and that they did well in other parts. (Player Q)

Fostering empathy for those taking on the challenge of learning a new sport reflected a multidimensional transition, with players’ psychological histories shaping the new cultural norms.

Player M noted this occasionally caused “a bit of tension” when straight players, lacking these traumatic associations, asserted their expertise in ways reminiscent of school hierarchies. But such issues were quickly addressed in line with the club’s ethos as a developmental space. The “knowledge gap” was acknowledged, but heterosexual allies on the team were asked:

> To be conscious not to be condescending. You’ve got years ... of experience and knowledge of the game, but don't talk down to us. Even if we haven't been playing rugby for very long, we’ve quickly gotten to speed with rugby and how to run a rugby club.

The club’s reframing of competitiveness was another key cultural transition that was shaped collectively. Players wanted improvement and success, but insisted that competitive outcomes never supersede belonging, distinguishing themselves from what they perceived to be competitive priorities of ‘hypermasculine’ heteronormative sports clubs. Long-standing members recognised their own early insecurities and curated for others the inclusive experiences that had made them want to stay:

> It is important that we emphasize our inclusiveness. Saying that you don’t have to have any level of skill to join the Hull Roundheads. We’ll train you up. Take your time, at your speed. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. (Player C)

Player Y recognized this extended from training into matches:

> When we're talking about games and matches, a lot of the focus is: "It will be great if we win, but we're not going there to win. We're going there to learn. And we're going to build our skill."

Determination to sustain this culture, even as players improved their skills and progressed to winning games, underscored a cultural transition in which ability became a dimension of inclusivity alongside sexuality - both rooted in players' previous experiences of judgement and social exclusion.

Through MMT, these narratives show that inclusion is not static, but a continually negotiated cultural process – shaped by the transitions members bring with them, and those they undergo together.

Identity Transitions: Becoming a 'Gay Rugby Player'

In tandem with overcoming psychological barriers and co-creating a supportive culture, all participants described significant identity transitions – embracing new and overlapping identities as athletes, rugby players, gay rugby players, and teammates.

Brewer et al. (1993) define athletic identity as "the degree to which individuals identify as athletes and the importance they assign to this role in life." Most participants reported never imagining. themselves as 'sporty' people prior to joining the Roundheads. As Player Y put it:

> I never really felt like I had a place in sport.

Player Q's initial reaction was typical:

> I was like, "I am not built for rugby. I am not strong enough. I'm not big enough." … I'd watched the Six Nations and the Rugby World Cup, and they're all tanked, aren't they? … That's not for me.

These anxieties reflected ingrained perceptions of rugby as a sport reserved for the hypermasculine. Like Player Q, Player M felt he did not fit the stereotype of the "big, burly kind of guys" associated with the sport; but the disconnect went deeper: as a gay man they did not feel they had the "alpha male" aggressiveness and competitiveness they assumed to define a rugby player. Among the anxieties that made Player L hesitate before attending training was the question:

> Do gay people even play rugby?

As they trained and played, however, these perceptions shifted. Player E, who had some previous rugby experience, observed how confidence grew rapidly:

> The first training sessions were very cautious about showing tackling technique and reminding people not to go too hard… But there were people who had never experienced that before, and to see them grow and blossom and that big grin on faces when they've done it. Their first tackle! "Woah! I've done it! I never knew I could do that!"

Such moments were fundamental and pivotal in forming new athletic, rugby player identities. As Player F attested:

> A few years ago, I absolutely would have laughed at myself, if I thought I'd be interested in rugby … Now I – and those who started out - we're proper die-hard rugby people now.

Townshend (2023) discusses the claim that some gay men join IGR clubs to gain the 'cultural capital' of rugby masculinity: performing the role of 'rugby player' to resist stereotypes of gay effeminacy. Player Q acknowledged that a few people joined the club early on "who were in it for not the right reasons":

> They wanted to wear the kit, and they wanted to put 'I'm a rugby player' on their Instagram profiles.

However, the dominant identity transition described in participants' narratives was not assimilation into, or appropriation of, heteronormative masculinity – but rather a *queering* of the rugby player identity (aligned with Madden, 2013). Participants celebrated being able to express their gay identities openly, having previously suppressed them in sporting contexts. This included public affection, such as kissing their partner after scoring a try; or blasting 'camp' music (like Kylie, Britney or Cher) during training. One notable element came in the replacement of rugby's traditionally 'laddish' post-match rituals (such as drinking contests and the often misogynistic rugby songs) with *RuPaul's Drag Race*-inspired lip-sync battles. Winning these became a playful and distinctly queer channel for the team's competitiveness. And even when performing stereotypical rugby 'laddishness', it was infused with camp irony. Players often took their shirts off when dancing in one of their sponsor bars, but as Player F explained:

> We knew it was a bit cringe, but it was a running joke… While we'd say, "We don't want to be super masc, laddy," or the rest of it … this was our way of trying to be like a rugby team, but in our own camp way.

Thus, athletic identity did not override sexual identity – rather, the two reshaped one another.

Moreover, for many, becoming a teammate was an entirely new identity as well. Player D had previously possessed an athletic identity before as a squash player; but he had taken up squash precisely because it was an individual sport, rather than a team one. As a result:

> I was always used to relying on my own skill set. It was not me relying on other people to reach a certain goal… I had a lot of walls up.

Transitioning to a team sport was therefore something that at first "terrified" him, but team culture helped those walls fall, as he realised how teammates were "there for each other." Player Y described a similar shift:

> I was terrified that I was going to be absolutely shit and I was going to fail the team, and we were going to lose because of me.

However, the reality of being a teammate quickly broke down that fear:

> I mean, we did lose – but it wasn't because of me, because it's a team sport… [My teammates] were really good at encouraging me to go and just do it, and once I got playing, it felt amazing.

Player C also emphasised how this relational identity – of "having each other's backs" as teammates – strengthened his sense of queer belonging too:

> You let yourself be who you were in a group… Being part of a team really makes that community grow inside you.

Through MMT analysis, powerful identity transitions are evident simultaneously: from non-athlete to athlete; from outsider to teammate; from masking queer identity to embracing it; from impostor feelings to a sense of belonging. Becoming a 'gay rugby player' was not simply the adoption of a sporting title for these participants, but a multidimensional reconstitution of self.

Social Transitions – Getting Intimate

As the previous section demonstrated, becoming a teammate also facilitated finding a sense of identity and belonging within a broader LGBTQIA+ community. Joining the Roundheads involved significant social transitions – developing new networks, reshaping relationships, and even exploring queer social spaces for the first time.

Many participants confirmed that the desire for meaningful social connection shaped their decision to join:

> I wasn't part of a community. I felt quite lonely… and I felt the need to have a good group of friends (Player C)

> I'd gone through a really bad break-up and thought I needed to make some friends (Player L)

> I'm quite socially awkward…. So, part [of joining] was that it's a new social situation [that] would be really good to start pushing myself out of that boundary. (Player Y)

Some participants already had good friendship circles, but which were largely heterosexual. For those players, the key transition was toward queer friendships. As Player M explained:

> There is something about having friends that know that side of your world … and what's involved in being a gay person today in Britain, in Hull!... Something about having friends that understand you a bit more in the realm of sexuality than your straight friends might be able to.

Player D similarly valued having:

> Queer friends who I would be able to have certain conversations that, maybe a lot of straight people couldn't understand.

He went on to describe those new friendships as "deep connections," with an "intellectual intimacy" that was enabled by a combination of shared queer identity and the intense bonds forged through rugby itself.

Forming these queer friendships also expanded broader social participation. Post-match socialising - central to rugby culture- provided a safe platform to explore LGBTQIA+ spaces. Player M recalled:

> If I was with my straight friends…. it wouldn't occur to them, and it wouldn't have occurred to me to say, "Oh let's go for a drink in Propaganda [a Hull gay bar]."

But the supportive presence of gay teammates facilitated both his first visit to a queer nightclub, and his first public same-sex kiss. As he reflected, while he had previously felt content enough to go out with his heterosexual friends to 'straight spaces':

> There's a difference between being kind of happy in those straight spaces and being fulfilled… It was important for me to go into those [LGBTQIA+] spaces, meet more people and have that kind of experience. That was the critical part for me.

Rather than serving as an escape from the commercial gay scene (as suggested in Gaston and Dixon, 2020), the Roundheads often acted as a gateway toward it, extending participants' social comfort zones.

Jindal-Snape and Miller (2008) argue that friends act as crucial support networks during transitions, 'enhancing one's resilience to challenges relating to change.' These testimonies show it is especially important for LGBTQIA+ individuals that those friends share and affirm their minority identity - echoing Glazzard's (2020) contention that solidarity among those with shared marginalization offers powerful "positive affirmation of identity."

IMT suggests heterosexual men are increasingly accepting and supportive of their gay friends – and that may well be true. Yet, as these narratives show, acceptance alone does not create the social conditions necessary for LGBTQIA+ adults to explore identity transitions, experience queer joy, or feel authentically themselves. LGBQTIA+ sports teams can enable those transitions, not only into sport, but into community and queer social belonging.

Case Study of Player A's Multiple and Multidimensional Transitions in Gay Rugby

Taking the full testimony of one participant enables a clearer, holistic view of how multiple transitions overlap and influence one another. Player A was selected simply because he was the first person interviewed; similar insights could be drawn from any participant narrative.

Player A's journey began with both a career transition and geographical transition, relocating to Hull for a new job and knowing few people locally, despite having lived in the city before:

> I didn't have any friends [in Hull] because I had just moved back.

He also hoped the club would help him build queer friendships in particular:

> I'd never really been a huge part of the scene… I had may a couple of gay friends, but I never had a group of gay friends or friends in the LGBT community… [and] I wanted that.

Even with this ambition, the scale of the resulting social transition surprised him:

> The amount of friends I have now pales in comparison… It's unbelievable.

And it was the experience of playing rugby that cemented the bonds. Player A's first away match was the moment he realised:

> That this is a group of people who want me to be part of their social circle as much as I want to be part of it.

This social network quickly expanded beyond the team itself as "you end up making friends with Roundhead's friends;" and then further still through the UK's IGR network. When he later moved to a different city in 2021, the shared experience of having played IGR rugby gave him common ground with people "who I wouldn't cross paths with normally" – and "open[ed] a communication gate" that allowed him to instantly strike up a connection with LGBTQIA+ people in his new city.

Like many Roundheads, Player A had arrived with low sporting confidence, having distanced himself from sports in his teens. He expected exclusion:

> I'm not going to be very good, nobody's going to put me on a pitch…. I don't belong here.

Scoring his first try, however, shifted that view:

> I got passed the ball, sidestepped someone and got a try from end one of the pitch to the other. And I went, "Oh, OK, maybe I'm not as bad at this rugby thing as I thought."

Early on, the Roundheads committee had adopted a strategy of rotating captains for each fixture, as way of countering memories of school-sport hierarchies. When Player A captained the team at a one-day IGR tournament, the outcome reinforced cultural values. While his doubts about his own rugby knowledge were evident at the start, the games went better than anyone had anticipated. "We won all of our pool games," he recalled, still with an evident sense of astonishment. He immediately followed this with:

> We got knocked out in the semi-finals. We had an amazing day.

The absence of a "but" joining these two statements is telling. The success of the day was not framed in terms of victory or defeat – getting "knocked out" was not positioned as failure. Instead, the emphasis fell on shared enjoyment, reflecting the cultural transition away from performance to participation that the Roundheads sought to model. For Player A, that moment "really cemented" his new athletic identity:

> It was at that point where I went, 'Do you know what, I do love rugby!

That identity transition was inseparable from the psychological transition of overcoming past trauma. Player A admitted to a "lot of fear" in every game:

> Fear of getting tackled, fear of tackling, fear of that first kick coming to you and then dropping the ball. Fear of letting my team down.

But knowing that his teammates felt the same way transformed that fear into social cohesion:

> You all feel it together - and nothing bonds you to somebody like the universal fear before a match. It's insane.

And the collective joy of then overcoming those fears within the games reinforced belonging:

> At the end of the match, that elation is also so universal… Nothing bonded me or broke down any barriers like a match.

The community of close gay friends that Player A gained through these experiences then impacted on his sexual identity. Rather than using rugby's hypermasculinity to mask his queerness (as some IMT research suggests is the case), Player A found freedom to express it. Prior to joining the team, most of his friends had been heterosexual; but surrounded by queer friends, he now recognised how he had adopted a heteronormative persona in the past:

> Prior to the rugby I was the epitome of a gay man not like other gay men. And I prided myself on that…. very toxic. I subscribed to a lot of heteronormativity… And I think that was due in part to me never being a part of a community.

In trying to 'fit in' with his straight friends, Player A realised:

> I was adapting myself to a norm that didn't really align with 100% of who I am as a person.

Having supportive queer peers in the Roundheads enabled and affirmed a transition to a more authentic identity:

> I became very comfortable … in my own skin, very confident. And that came from just being able to be myself.

That shift also influenced his first same-sex relationship, prompting reflection on how he initially mocked his boyfriend's love of *Ru Paul's Drag Race*. He now identified that behaviour and attitude as a "very immature" manifestation of his own internalized homophobia, and now challenged it through an eager embrace of queer culture he once rejected:

> Now I'm watching Drag Race …. I've been out in drag a couple of times in Hull with the Roundheads and absolutely loved it… The first queer book I read was one my friend [Player B] gave me, The Velvet Rage. And now I have an entire shelf full of queer LGBT books…. Five years ago, I would not have watched [a] queer film. And now I'm absolutely obsessed!

Mental wellbeing improved (Player A noted that previously "I was mentally not in the best place), as he developed in social connections, confidence, identity authenticity, and physical fitness. And in line with MMT theory, his transitions positively reshaped others too. His increased authenticity with straight friends, who he now felt "so much more comfortable around," helped transform their understanding of queer identity too - in what Player A called "a domino effect."

Through MMT analysis, Player A's testimony shows how transitions in social connection, psychological security, queer identity, and community culture are deeply intertwined. Rugby did not simply offer a social outlet – it facilitated a restructuring of identity and belonging across multiple domains, while simultaneously contributing to the evolving understanding of inclusion within the club itself.

Conclusion

Although Inclusive Masculinity Theory argues that gay and bisexual men are increasingly accepted within mainstream sport, the narratives analysed here demonstrate a continued and strongly felt need for LGBTQIA+- specific spaces. The application of Multiple and Multidimensional Transitions theory reveals why negative experiences in school sport continue to shape gay men's psychological readiness to engage in team sport. These lingering traumas influenced not only why individuals joined the Roundheads, but how they experienced joy, confidence, and affirmation at they moved through interconnected psychological, cultural, identity and social transitions. What mattered was not simply finding friends but doing so while collectively overcoming long-embedded fears and openly embracing queer identities within a sporting context.

MMT analysis also illuminates the transitional dynamics of the club itself. Witnessing each other's journeys fosters a shared responsibility for inclusivity, reflected in Player O's emphasis on players needing to remain mindful of "how their behaviour impacts on somebody else" and inclusivity then "branch[ing] out and up" from those observations. The Roundheads' culture is not without challenges: cliques formed, heterosexual allies sometimes struggled to relate to teammates' prior anxieties, and tensions emerged between remaining welcoming and increasing competitive ambitions. Crucially, however, the club actively engaged with those issues. The *Safer* project – originating from the interviews that inform this study – has itself become a key mechanism through which players reflect on one another's transitions. Annual performances are followed by workshops, which invite newer players to share their own stories and reflect on how their experiences compare to those who founded the team, so that the whole club can ensure practices continue to evolve in line with the shifting composition and needs of its members. As Player F observed, being genuinely inclusive requires recognising that:

> Not every gay person knows how every gay person goes through life, or how every trans person goes through life, and experiences life in all those directions.

MMT analysis makes clear that inclusive clubs are not simply social communities of acceptance or refuges from homophobia. They are evolving environments in which inclusion is continuously reconstructed through members' multidimensional transitions. Whereas mainstream sports still often require individuals to assimilate into fixed, pre-existing norms, LGBTQIA+ teams have the capacity to disrupt those norms and enable more expansive, diverse and authentically queer ways of belonging in sport.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

This study relied on interviews conducted at a single point in time, capturing participants' reflections on earlier experiences. While this retrospective approach enabled players to articulate the significance of their transitions with the benefit of hindsight, a longitudinal study would allow for closer examination of how those transitions evolve and how they continue to influence, and be influenced by, the club's developing culture. Additionally, because this analysis focused on cisgender gay male members, further work is needed to better understand the multidimensional transitions of

trans, non-binary, female-identifying, and heterosexual participants within inclusive rugby settings. Finally, as one club cannot represent the full diversity of IGR membership, the author is now leading a comparative global project to explore how these dynamics are evident across different cultural contexts.

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Data Accessibility

In consenting to the research, some participants from the Roundheads opted to limit access to their anonymised interview transcripts to the research team at the University of Hull; while others have agreed that their interview transcripts can be shared for other research purposes on request and on their approval. Anyone wanting more information or to engage with the project is welcome to email the author at d.n.eldridge@hull.ac.uk.

Competing Interests

As discussed in the positionality statement, the author was a founding member and chair of the Hull Roundheads from 2018 to 2023, with an 'insider's' perspective on the club, but has no competing interests in relation to the findings of this work.

Author Contributions

Dr Eldridge has sole responsibility for the conception of the study, presented results, analysis and writing of this paper.

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